DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 966 CS 011 644

TITLE	Literacy and Poverty: A View from the Inside. Research Report.
INSTITUTION	National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), Ottawa (Ontario).
SPONS AGENCY	National Literacy Secretariat, Ottawa (Ontario).
REPORT NO	ISBN-1-895852-00-5
PUB DATE	92
NOTE	152p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), 316-256 King Edward Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario KIN 7MI, Canada ($10 U.S.).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Books (010)
EDRS PRICE	Document Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; Foreign Countries; Interviews; *Literacy; *Literacy Education; *Low Income; *Poverty; Qualitative Research; Reading Research; Social Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Canada; Literacy as a Social Process

ABSTRACT

Giving a human face to the wealth of statistical information on literacy problems in Canada, a qualitative study investigated the experiences and views of socially and educationally disadvantaged people in Canada. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 105 persons with low literacy skills from every province and territory in Canada. In addition, 119 literacy teachers and activists, poverty activists, and a broad range of social service providers with low-income clients were interviewed. Results indicated that: (1) the circumstances that created people's poverty were much the same as those preventing them from acquiring an education; (2) people growing up poor had to deal with poor nutrition, inadequate housing, health problems, stress, insecurity, subtle or overt discrimination, and difficulty in maintaining dignity and self-esteem; (3) children with disabilities, native children, and children of racial minorities confronted additional barriers; (4) school systems were not equipped to deal with these problems; (5) people with low literacy skills became trapped in insecure, low-wage work or income assistance; and (6) enrolling in literacy programs usually did not mean an end to poverty. Recommendations include: literacy policy should not be developed in isolation from other relevant policy areas and should be developed in consultation with the people affected; and a broad range of literacy training options need to be developed to meet clients' diverse needs and circumstances. (Contains 239 references; a 74-item annotated bibliography on literacy and poverty, a detailed description of methodology, and lists of people and organizations consulted or interviewed are attached.) (RS)

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